

HRIC Launches *Challenging China* in New York and Hong Kong

***Challenging China: Struggle and Hope
in an Era of Change***

Edited by Sharon Hom and Stacy Mosher

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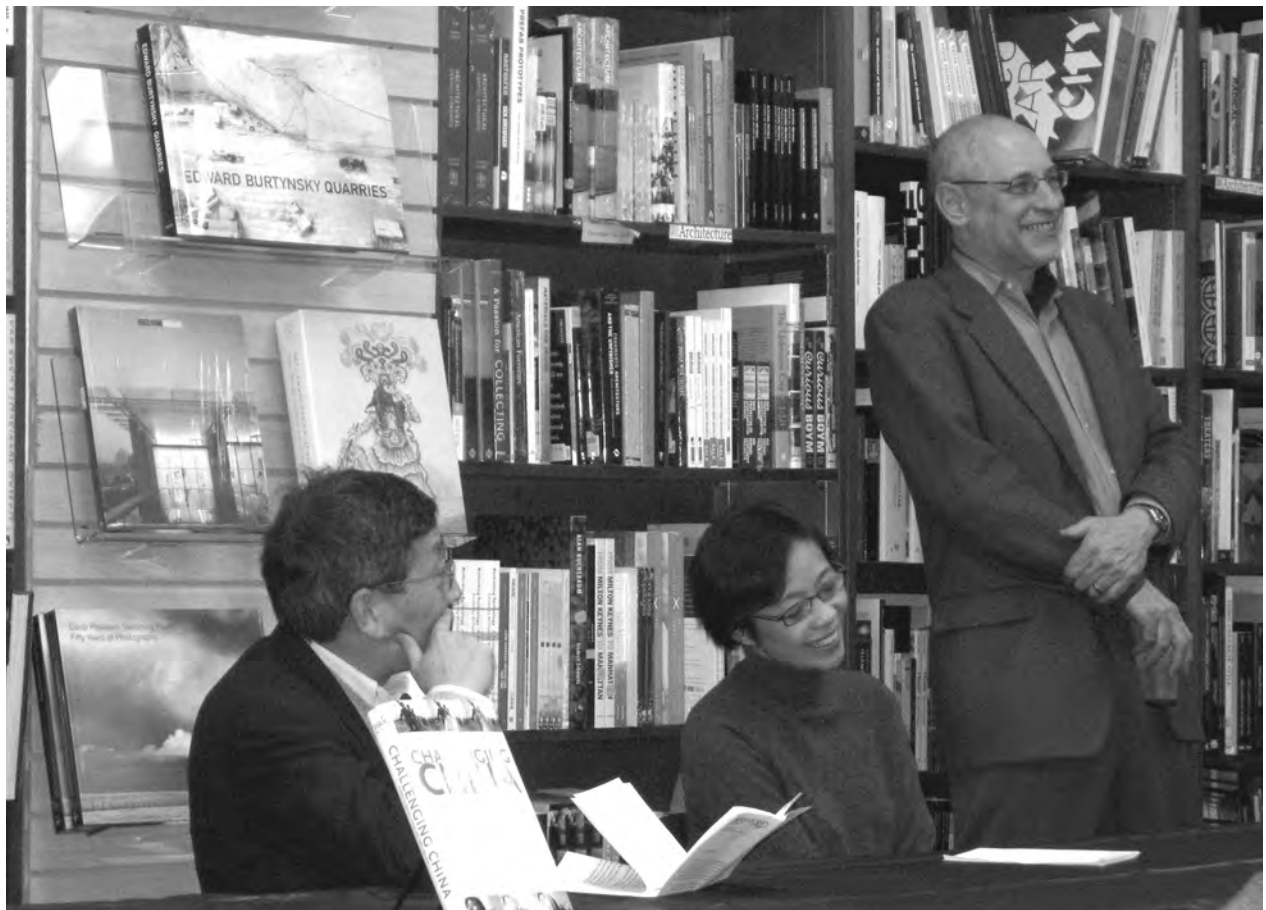
On December 4, 2007, Andy Nathan, HRIC Board Co-chair, Hu Ping, Board member and editor of *Beijing Spring*, and Executive Director Sharon Hom hosted a lively discussion with the public about the book at **Book Culture**, a New York bookstore. Additionally, on December 11, Sharon introduced the book at the **Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club** along with Yan Li, whose poetry appears in the book and also in this issue of *China Rights Forum*.

REMARKS BY HU PING Book Culture, New York

China is increasingly drawing the world's attention. It is fair to say that in the next couple of decades, the problem of China will become the most important problem. Because China is a large country and its population is one-fifth of the world's total, and because we live in an age of globalization, our lives are like those in a tiny global village. China's problems will not only be China's problems. Rather, its problems will be the world's problems.

The 27 essays in the collection, *Challenging China: Struggle and Hope in an Era of Change*, paint a portrait of modern-day China from many different angles, and reveal a system in which human rights have come under severe attack. In order to win the right to host the 2008 Olympics, the Chinese government made promises to improve the human rights situation, but has thus far failed to honor these commitments. The

Hu Ping, Sharon Hom, and Andy Nathan discuss *Challenging China* at Book Culture in New York City on December 4.



human rights situation in China has not improved; rather, it has worsened. To stage what they consider a successful Olympics in 2008, the government has presented an image of China as a flourishing land of peace and prosperity, void of any protests or dissenting voices. It has led those outside of China to overlook its problems, including, but not limited to, its human rights problems. When the government says that it must “clean up” possible hitches ahead of the Olympics, it not only represses dissidents and other human rights activists, but also drives away large numbers of migrant workers, because these people damage the pristine image that the government would like to preserve. The government sees this kind of persecution as an important part of its preparations for 2008.

Generally speaking, the staging of the Olympics in an autocratic country can result in two very different scenarios: it can lead to the promotion of human rights improvements in the host country or it can lead to a regression in its human rights situation. Unfortunately, the facts so far indicate that China is heading in the latter direction.

Next year, millions of visitors from around the world will surge towards China for the Beijing Olympics. What will they encounter? What kind of picture of China will they leave with? It is easy to imagine that a huge number of people will be astounded by China’s economic prosperity, and experience the warmth and goodwill of the Chinese people. But due to the Chinese government’s diligence in glossing over problems, many will miss the opportunity to see the dark side of Chinese society. Perhaps there will be some who do notice the widening economic disparity and the infringement of human rights. They may be confused, and find themselves unable to make sense of this, unsure of how to interpret and reconcile such conflicting images of China. And then there may be some who optimistically believe that as long as China continues on its current trajectory of reform, these problems will inevitably be mitigated, if not solved. Still others may believe in the culturally relativistic argument that Chinese people have their own standards for human rights, and that we should not hold China up to Western norms. To these arguments, I must respond.

First of all, I firmly believe that human rights standards are universal, with no distinction between China’s and the West’s. The reasoning is simple: like Westerners, Chinese people do not like to be told that they cannot criticize or dissent against the government. Like Westerners, Chinese people are not willing to be imprisoned or massacred for expressing opposition to the government. And like Westerners, Chinese people do not wish to have their right to a fair and open trial stripped away, or to be deprived of their right to defend themselves, when the government arrests and interrogates them.

When we speak of the widening gap between the rich and poor in China today, what I want to strongly emphasize is that not only is the gap very large, but the character of the problem is particularly malevolent. China’s economic disparity problem is a unique one: it was not created by history or by market forces, but by autocratic rule. In China, the reason why the poor live in poverty is because their possessions have been seized by those in power; the rich live in wealth because they are able to use their influence to snatch away the things that others have produced. Most people look at the Chinese economy and only see the breakneck speeds at which it has developed. Indeed, when compared to Russia and other former Communist countries in Eastern Europe, China’s economic reform appears superior. But the problem is, no matter how many difficulties Russia and the former Soviet countries have encountered in their economic reform and development, these difficulties at least occurred within systems of public supervision and democratic participation. In those countries, citizens have the right to express themselves and the right to vote, which gives their reforms a certain kind of basic legitimacy.

The Party used the name of reform to turn the whole people’s public property into the private property of its own members. After that, it stole in the name of revolution, then divided the spoils in the name of reform.

China’s situation is exactly the opposite. No matter

how many dizzying accomplishments that China's reforms seem to achieve, because they take place in a system that lacks public supervision and democratic participation, it all inevitably leads to the plundering of the masses' property by the rich and powerful. On one hand, in the past decade the Communist Party has continually used its power to appropriate the wealth created by its citizens for itself. On the other hand, it has forced the detrimental consequences of its economic growth onto the backs of its citizens. First, the Party used the name of revolution to transform the common people's private property into the public property of the "whole people." Then it used the name of reform to turn the whole people's public property into the private property of its own members. After that, it stole in the name of revolution, then divided the spoils in the name of reform. Yet these two opposite crimes were both committed in the space of 50 years by the same Party. This kind of reform bears no legitimacy whatsoever. Therefore, the twisted pattern of wealth distribution that it has spawned cannot be recognized or accepted by the people.

Ten years ago, China's *Reading* magazine published a short essay, which cited an old peasant of Shanxi. This old peasant had mentioned Deng Xiaoping's "Letting Some People Become Rich First" policy, saying, "Before the liberation in 1949, my village had one landlord and two rich peasants, and this was already considered as 'letting some people become rich first.'" If things were going to turn out like this, why bother in the first place? Last year, a worker who had just been laid off wrote on a blog: "The planned economy definitely needs reform, and in order to have reform, a price must be paid. But the planned economy was not an invention of us workers, but of you, the Communist Party. So why is it that the workers and not the Communist Party are paying the price? Why do you force us into unemployment, while you transform yourselves into capitalists?"

The Chinese authorities know very well that their so-called "Chinese model" is built upon an unfair, illegitimate foundation that goes against both human rights and democracy. This is why they stubbornly insist on maintaining a one-party system and severe political restrictions on the people. They worry that if they relax

their political grip for even one moment, economic justice, or a settling of accounts in the economy, will swell into a wave that is too great for them to withstand. True, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have declared their concern for the weak and the powerless, and have implemented some measures to alleviate the problem of economic disparity. But these are no more than ploys of "moderate repression," ultimately aimed at maintaining a viable, continuous system of exploitation.

The Chinese authorities say they truly hope that given another few decades of peace and stability, they can improve China's development even more. What they mean is that they hope to continue the system of reform and development under an autocracy, on one hand buying time to "cleanse" ill-gotten "black money" (that is, bribes), on the other hand mitigating the gap between the rich and the poor somewhat. What we can be certain of is this: a superpower that is built on such criminal methods will only become an increasingly self-confident, overbearing, and powerful autocratic regime. Such a regime will inevitably pose a great threat to the freedom and peace of all mankind. For those of us who cherish our freedom and peace, this is not something to be treated lightly.

Translated by Victoria Kwan

REMARKS BY SHARON HOM **Foreign Correspondents' Club, Hong Kong**

This week marks International Human Rights Day, this year commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and next year China hosts the 2008 Beijing Olympics—making it a good time to reflect on human rights challenges, commit to redoubling our efforts, and look ahead for opportunities to leverage reform. *Challenging China: Struggle and Hope in an Era of Change* is a collection of translated essays, articles, poetry, and reflections by Chinese intellectuals, writers, journalists, and activists. It provides windows into the lives of migrants, young women forced into prostitution, the impact of HIV/AIDS and health pandemics on poor villagers, the lingering effects of exile from one's homeland, the burdens of history, and the enforced

amnesia for massive past abuses like the Cultural Revolution or the June 4th crackdown. *Challenging China* provides insights into the reality for the vast majority of China's people living behind the gleaming facades, now so carefully packaged for the Olympics.

Most of the collection features pieces that originally appeared in *China Rights Forum*. Collectively, these voices are a powerful testament to the ongoing human rights abuses and human costs; at the same time, they represent the diversity of perspectives, critiques, and demands for accountability and justice that cannot be censored or silenced by the authorities. These are the challenges from China's own people that the regime will have to address.

The book's final section, *The Shepherd's Song*, opens with one of my favorite Yan Li poems, "Give It Back to Me" (还给我), and suggests the possibility of healing and spiritual reclaiming, and the ways that individuals can choose to heal themselves and their communities.

Each question invokes a powerful resonance in a Chinese register, reflecting the realities behind the dominant story of modernity and progress, defined by Shanghai style and double-digit economic growth.

The Être exhibition "The Face of Human Rights" at the Fringe Club next door poses a series of questions that are at the heart of the human rights challenges facing China and the world. Each question invokes a powerful resonance in a Chinese register, reflecting the realities behind the dominant story of modernity and progress, defined by Shanghai style and double-digit economic growth. "What is the value of a human life?" This question should remind us that China ranks highest in the world in executions. "How can they say I am different just because of the color of my skin?" This one brings to mind those discriminated against thanks to the rigidity of the *hukou* system or discrimination against ethnic minorities. "Nowhere to run, no place to hide?" Despite international rights granted to refugees and displaced persons, in China these rights

are limited and bleed into the rights of religious belief and right to life. For North Korean refugees seeking out China, there is no entry; for Tibetans, seeking to preserve the integrity and survival of their culture and religion, there is no exit, as was starkly demonstrated before the eyes of the world with the shooting at the Nangpa La Pass in September 2006.

Other questions regarding rights to food, health, and housing: "Why is half the planet hungry?" "Must a woman's life in some African countries be so much shorter than in Western Europe?" "Is it human to live in a cardboard box?" "Is it possible to be free and equal without education?" Chinese have witnessed the collapse of a basic social safety network: 600-700 million rural inhabitants have no access to primary health care, migrant children have limited access to education, and massive numbers of people are displaced as a result of Olympics venue construction. "Human capital or human beings?" Workers used and discarded. Hundreds of millions of workers are displaced from state owned enterprises, many working in dangerous mines or factories and risking their health, limbs, and lives, or robbed of their hard-won wages.

"Why should we be allowed to have secrets?" The flip side of right of expression and access to information is the right to privacy, yet in China it is the government that has all the privacy under the state secrets system, whereby anything and everything can be swept into an all-inclusive net with retroactivity provisions, marked by a lack of transparency and accountability.

"What are we supposed to believe in?" The freedom of thought and belief is ignored and persecution continues of non-state sanctioned religious practitioners and groups. Meanwhile ethnic minority groups asserting their cultural identity and religious belief are labeled as terrorists and separatists.

Should the word "free" only be allowed in such statements as "This dog is free from lice"? What about freedom of expression? I don't need to tell you here in Hong Kong that the Chinese government is an authoritarian regime with zero tolerance for critical voices and different views. Hong Kong still presents the hope of a democracy front flowing from the south. In con-

trast, Beijing is building a state-of-the-art technical system of censorship, surveillance, and control, and the security apparatus being put in place for the Olympics raises serious issues of privacy and the enhanced repressive capacity of the state after 2008.

In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith wonders to himself, "how does one man assert his power over another?" "By making him suffer," he responds. An affront to the rights to a fair trial and prohibition of torture, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture concluded from his mission to China that torture remained endemic and he noted a palpable climate of fear. Rights defenders, lawyers, petitioners, and activists are regularly subjected to violence, denial of basic procedural rights in politicized prosecutions (such as access to their lawyer), and subjected to torture in prison and detention. In November 2008, China's report on the Convention Against Torture will be reviewed at the UN, but that occurs after the international media has packed up its cameras and headed home after the Olympics. Events like these demand close media attention.

How China addresses these human rights challenges has profound domestic, regional, and international

impacts. Because China has one-fifth of the world's population, and due to the interrelated impacts of globalization, especially concerning the environment, China's problems are the world's problems. China's rules of engagement are powerful: the threat or promise of access to markets, information, and domestic groups is powerful. The trade-offs and costs, including self-censorship, fear, and accepting the convenient half-truths of the China success story, need to be more publicly and collectively addressed and confronted.

We should keep in mind the words of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, that the core values enshrined in the UDHR of inherent dignity, justice, non-discrimination, equality, and fairness "apply to everyone, everywhere, always." In advancing human rights, we must aim for the promise at the heart of the UDHR: fulfillment of human potential. Poets, artists, writers, and cultural workers—like Yan Li—remind us of the reasons we struggle for human rights. They remind us of our potential for creating beauty and hope and they remind us how important it is to keep alive and nourish the human spirit and to honor the stewardship that we have been given of this frail planet.